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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000185

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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (FORMAT, ADDRESSEE)

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SUBJECT: REGIONAL INTEGRATION OF IRAQ: OMAN

REF: A) STATE 21447; B) 08 MUSCAT 877

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CLASSIFIED BY: L. Victor Hurtado, Charge d'Affaires, U.S. Department
of State, U.S. Embassy - Muscat; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

Summary

¶1. (C) Oman maintains cordial, but limited relations with the government of Iraq. Although there are no divisive issues separating the two countries, neither are there bilateral ties or common interests strong enough at this time to prompt Muscat to seek to expand its relationship with Baghdad. Oman does not begrudge Iraqi participation in the GCC plus 3, but is concerned that this forum may be perceived as primarily anti-Iran. Developing business and commercial ties between Oman and Iraq, coupled with continued improvements in Iraq's security environment, afford the greatest opportunities for the strengthening of Oman-Iraq relations, including the appointment of a resident Omani ambassador in Baghdad. Oman also would likely back GCC efforts to help Iraq resume its place in the regional and international communities. For its part, the Iraqi government might consider posting a defense attachC) at its embassy in Muscat to help develop a military-to-military relationship. End Summary.

Status of Oman-Iraq Relations

¶2. (C) The Omani leadership has no grievances against, or major issues with, the Iraqi government. Oman forgave early on Iraq's limited foreign debt and supports its inclusion in Arab institutions, as most recently evidenced by the participation of an Iraqi parliamentary delegation in the Muscat-hosted Arab Parliamentary Union (APU) conference in March 2009. Iraq maintains a small embassy and a resident ambassador in Muscat, although Oman has declined to re-open its embassy in Baghdad for security reasons. Sultan Qaboos told the Ambassador in spring 2008 that he recognized that Oman and other Arab states should "do more" to support the Iraqi government. A senior Omani economic delegation consequently staged a three-day visit to Baghdad from July 29 b" July 1, 2008; an Iraqi trade delegation made a reciprocal visit to Oman in January 2009.

¶3. (C) While there are no major irritants in the Oman-Iraq relationship, neither are there sufficiently strong ties or shared interests to draw the two countries -- which have always been somewhat distant in both geographic and political terms -- closer together. [Note: Oman was distrustful of Iraqi Ba'athist regimes given their support for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman (PFLO) during and even after the Darfur rebellion in the 1970s. End Note.] Omani officials remain concerned that extremist and sectarian violence in Iraq could spill over into other states in the region,

but otherwise do not see the Sultanate as having a direct vested interest in Iraq that would justify expanding its limited relations with Baghdad. Also, some Omani officials continue to harbor doubts about Prime Minister Maliki's ability to maintain effective control of the country without U.S. military assistance and to achieve reconciliation with Sunni leaders.

GCC Plus 3

14. (C) Oman values the opportunity for direct dialogue with the Secretary afforded by its participation in the GCC plus 3. Given its complicated relationship with its neighbor to the north, however, Oman is very concerned that the GCC plus 3 may be perceived primarily as an anti-Iran body. Moreover, while the Omani government has no objection in principle to the addition of Iraq to the group, officials in Muscat sometimes gripe about inclusion of non-GCC countries that have differing political, demographic and security concerns from the Gulf states (and which dilute Oman's voice in the forum).

Obstacles to Improving Oman-Iraq Relations

15. (C) Relatively weak bilateral ties as noted above, along with Oman's traditional reluctance to become deeply involved in regional security matters or political controversies, probably represent the greatest barrier to a strengthening of relations between Oman and Iraq. The lack of active Iraqi outreach to Oman, either through its embassy in Muscat or in other channels, is also a factor. Content for the most part to let other GCC countries take the lead on Iraq, Omani officials see no valid reason to shake up the status quo in its relations with Baghdad at this time. The government has so far declined to make even the symbolic move of naming a non-resident ambassador to Iraq, arguing that it won't pursue form over substance by appointing an ambassador until that individual can safely live and work in Baghdad. In this context, Oman would likely be open to participating in a new regional cooperation forum, but would want it to serve an identified and useful purpose that would set it apart from existing dialogue mechanisms.

The Way Forward

16. (C) The best hope for strengthened Oman-Iraq ties lies with developing commercial relations between the two countries and continued improvements in the security situation in Iraq. As more Omani companies establish business interests in Iraq, and as more Arab countries post ambassadors and beef up their diplomatic presence in an increasingly secure Iraqi capital, the more likely Oman will be to name an ambassador to Iraq and engage in senior-level consultations with Iraqi officials. Embassy Muscat can help this process by facilitating communications

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between Muscat and Baghdad, and by continuing to remind the Omani government that the best way to prevent Iraq from becoming a Shi'a dominated state under Iranian influence is for countries such as Oman to do more to integrate Iraq into the broader region. For its part, Iraq could consider posting a defense attaché at its embassy in Baghdad to help develop a military-to-military relationship with Oman. This could also potentially lead to an invitation to Iraq to become an observer in Omani military exercises (or GCC exercises in Oman) open to foreign observers.